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## Expanding the knowledge base of teachers' use of communication tools for language learning

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 23 July 2015

Received in revised form 28 July 2016

Accepted 29 July 2016

Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

CMC

Experienced

CALL

Teacher

Learning

In-service

### ABSTRACT

The changing nature of computer-mediated communication (CMC) continues to provide language learners with new opportunities for authentic language use. Many language teachers appropriate CMC tools to support language learning and teaching and as a consequence, their practical knowledge develops.

Based on a longitudinal interview study with sixteen participants in Australia and New Zealand, this study gives a possible outline of the knowledge base that tertiary language teachers develop through using everyday communication technologies in their classrooms. The learning of these experienced teachers is described by detailing aspects of the Teacher Knowledge Grid, including the central role of pedagogy in how teachers supported their students' learning. Participants identified that using new tools afforded opportunities to teach in ways that suited them as individuals as well as new avenues for their own learning. Finally, the Teacher Knowledge Grid suggests questions that might be used to support professional development and reflection on integrating computer-mediated tools into classroom practice.

Teachers' practical knowledge includes more than just the skills needed to use a tool; it includes personal and professional understandings of how technology relates to particular pedagogical contexts, as well as developing abilities to facilitate their own and their students' learning to use new tools.

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### 1. Introduction

Possibilities for communication have developed enormously over the last century. Technology has enabled new ways of interacting locally and globally. Information can be disseminated in a variety of ways and work places can use different environments in which to work collaboratively. Many language teachers have embraced new tools that afford interaction between students and teacher.

However, the communicative playing field is continually evolving, with an accompanying need for teachers to continue to develop their knowledge and understanding about tool use and integration. As new technologies emerge in the future, in-service teachers, no matter how well-prepared in their pre-service education (including possibly quite specific CALL education), will have to continue their learning about new tools and the possibilities they afford the language classroom. The

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2016.07.008>

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Please cite this article in press as: Haines, K., Expanding the knowledge base of teachers' use of communication tools for language learning, System (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2016.07.008>

process of learning to use new technologies as part of teaching, and the tensions that arise through these experiences, may well challenge existing professional identities (White, 2007).

The purpose of this article is to outline dimensions of the growing knowledge base that language teachers acquire as they integrate computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools into their classroom contexts. Understanding these dimensions can be a starting point for considering teacher development.

## 2. Literature review

The knowledge that language teachers develop through practice has been characterized by Borg (2006) as ‘an often tacit, personally-held, practical system of mental constructs’. Developing understandings of technology use are gained through practice. The reality for many CALL teachers is that they have learned more about technology by informal rather than formal means (Kessler, 2006, 2007). Despite the value of short or graduate courses, much teacher learning continues to occur in classroom contexts, through actual use of technology. This project therefore made a deliberate choice to investigate the ongoing learning of experienced in-service language teachers.

Several existing models describe the skills and knowledge that CALL teachers specifically require. Dimensions clearly identified are the need for both technological and pedagogical skills. Hampel and Stickler’s (2005) skills model, for example, is based on the authors’ experiences of training teachers to use virtual classroom software. The bottom three layers in Hampel and Stickler’s model deal with technology, layers three to five with pedagogy, while the top two layers suggest the importance of individual teachers being able to infuse themselves more personally into their teaching. One critique of the pyramid levels of this model is that it frames learning as a linear progression, while in reality, for teachers who are learning to use a new tool, pedagogical understandings may well develop concurrently with technological skills (Compton, 2009). Compton suggests a matrix framework that includes the domain of evaluation. She identifies the kinds of knowledge and skills that teachers at varying levels of proficiency might be expected to have acquired: knowledge is acquired initially by the novice, and applied by the proficient teacher, while the expert teacher is able to apply knowledge in creative ways.

A somewhat broader framework to describe a teacher’s knowledge base is Hubbard and Levy’s (2006) matrix, which outlines the knowledge and skills that teachers need—what they need to know and to be able to do—across technical and pedagogical domains. Hubbard (2007) extends this description of technical and pedagogical skills and knowledge by suggesting that teachers can use the framework as part of their professional development.

Finally, technology and pedagogy as domains are integral to the TPACK model which is not specific to language teachers (Mishra & Koehler, 2006, 2009). However, in line with the suggestion from Brantley-Dias and Ertmer (2013) that, to be useful, TPACK must be based in discipline-specific contexts, numerous CALL researchers (most recently Carbová & Betáková, 2013; Debbagh & Jones, 2015; Liu & Kleinsasser, 2015; Tai, 2015) have used the framework as a basis to explore language teachers’ own learning, teaching and technology integration.

While the areas of technology and pedagogy identified in these different models of teacher knowledge are well-documented, the notion of on-going teacher identity development is also described in the literature. Learning and identity development are intertwined (Comas-Quinn, 2011; Kirkup, 2002; Kubanyiova, 2009; ten Dam & Blom, 2006; Wenger, 1998). As language teachers develop their pedagogical content knowledge, they grapple with questions of identity, such as ‘What kind of teacher am I? What kind of teacher do I want to become?’ (Kubanyiova, 2009; Singh & Richards, 2006).

Through developing new technical and pedagogical skills in relation to teaching in online environments, the professional identity of CALL teachers may well undergo change. White (2007, p. 107) reminds us that, in considering online environments and teacher learning, ‘it is critical that teacher identity is not taken for granted as if it were an inert aspect of teaching contexts and processes, or an outcome of pedagogical skills, training or experience’. Rather, teacher identity construction deserves consideration as an integral part of learning to teach with technology.

Specific ways in which teacher identity may be challenged are in relation to being placed in the position of learner and also in relation to teachers’ creativity and teaching style. For experienced teachers, it can be challenging to be in the position of learner again, particularly when students are often more familiar with technologies and can solve problems faster. The top two levels of Hampel and Stickler’s (2005) skills pyramid are creativity and teaching style. Working in online environments may challenge the ‘teaching style’ of individuals (Rosell-Aguilar, 2006). The use of new communicative technologies offers individuals the potential for creativity. Examples include the affordances that a particular technology allows for teachers to reveal themselves in new ways to their students (Richards, 2006) or indeed to create new identities online through innovative uses of materials and media. As well as learning skills in a new environment, online teachers are learning to understand in new ways what it can mean to be a teacher.

The teacher self is evident in the top two levels of Hampel and Stickler’s (2005) model, and the first two rows of Compton’s (2009) model. Although it is not present in Hubbard and Levy’s (2006) matrix, it is accounted for to some extent in their role-based model, which highlights the development of individual expertise in a variety of roles.

To summarise, in outlining current understandings of what comprises a CALL knowledge base, the two areas of technology and pedagogy are common to the existing models of teacher knowledge discussed. As well, it appears that there is a further dimension of self-development, that relates to an individual teacher’s creativity, the choices they make and their teaching style.

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